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SUBJECT: ARMENIA RENOVATES 800-YR OLD JEWISH CEMETERY

REF: YEREVAN 320

¶1. (U) On May 11, Ambassador joined the Vayats Dzor governor, churchmen, foreign diplomats, scholars and dignitaries to dedicate the renovation of Armenia's ancient Jewish cemetery located near the Armenian village of Yeghegis, in the Vayats Dzor region in the south of the country. Thirteen years after its discovery by an Armenian bishop and its subsequent studying by Israeli Armenologist Michael Stone and archaeologist David Amit, the cemetery of 64 unique memorial stones has been restored to include access by foot, a surrounding wall and multilingual informational signage at the cemetery and in Yeghegis.

¶2. (U) During the ceremony, Dr. Amit pointed out some of the more interesting tombstone inscriptions, many of which remain quite legible in Hebrew. The Israeli and former Georgian ambassadors to Armenia spoke of the extraordinary cooperation between the GOAM and donor community that made the project possible. Ambassador Yovanovitch also addressed the significance of Jews and Armenians living together in harmony so many centuries ago and the importance of tolerance towards others. She noted the GOAM's participation in restoring the cemetery as indicative of its support for religious freedom in Armenia.

¶3. (U) The ceremony was a rare opportunity to bring together not only archaeologists, Armenologists and other scholars from Europe, Israel and the United States, but also the heads of the rival Jewish organizations in Armenia, Rabbi Gersh-Meir Burstein and Rimma Varzhapetian (see reftel). In the brief ceremony that dedicated the cemetery's renovation, Burstein recited the traditional kaddish, and Varzhapetian thanked the GOAM, the project donors, including USAID's Competitive Armenia Private Sector (CAPS) program, and the Israeli government for preserving a small piece of Jewish heritage in the region and promoting tolerance in Armenia in the process.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: With this event the GOAM fulfilled the pledge made by the late Prime Minister Andranik Markarian to support the restoration of one of the most unique Jewish landmarks in the entire Caucasus. It also highlighted the cooperation that is possible not only between Armenians and Jews, but between the local factions of Armenia's divided Jewish community. END COMMENT.

YOVANOVITCH